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Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha?? by Christine Lavin

Celebrating 25 Years as a Performer and Recording Artist

Christine Lavin's Show Goes on 24/7, and She Lets the Audience in Once a Night to Join In

Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??
by Christine Lavin

“Whether she’s recording an album solely of her favorite recipes (with an accompanying cookbook), hosting knitting circles before her shows, or, in this case, writing a ‘mem-wha,’ she is what every artist yearns to be: an original.”

So writes award-winning actor and acclaimed singer-songwriter Jeff Daniels, one of many dozens, scores, hundreds, and probably thousands of singer-songwriters who have been touched and/or helped over the past 25 years by Christine Lavin. And while she’s deservedly known as “the Queen of Contemporary Folk Music,” Lavin, as Daniels notes, is also adept at knitting (she invented the “brain cozy” knitted headband) and cooking (her “Barack-o-late” Chip Cookies were a big hit during the last presidential campaign).

“Whether she’s singing songs or merrily spilling her life onto these pages,” Daniels continues, “to be in her audience is to be grabbed by the lapels, expertly led around, and—when it’s all said and done—laughed out, genuinely moved, and thinking differently.”

You learn all this and so much more in the pages of *Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha??*, a most personal memoir that is as engaging and endearing as its writer. The original DIY artist, Lavin has been striking her own unique course since she self-released her debut full-length studio album *Future Fossils* in 1984. She documents her career highlights in *Cold Pizza for Breakfast*.

From her traditional Catholic school upbringing in upstate New York to her co-writing experience and continuing long friendship with nonagenarian Songwriters Hall of Famer Ervin Drake (“It Was a Very Good Year,” “Good Morning Heartache”), Lavin relates one delectable story after another, covering all the facets of the music business as it pertains to the wholly independent singer-songwriter. From learning to play guitar by watching an instructional program on PBS (she later met her teacher—and Nanci Griffith’s!—at a show) to her first tentative efforts as a songwriter and performer, she recounts the kind of wacky experiences that any trusting, gullible, and naive young artist probably undergoes at one time or other—all the odd jobs, from working in a canning factory as a string bean inspector “pulling out mice guts, twigs, and dead grasshoppers” (she reveals how Odetta chastised her years later for telling an audience about it), to winning a talent contest for female impersonators (she replied “I don’t know” when asked if she was a real female), to scribbling down the laugh-getting lines for Robert Klein when he forgot his tape recorder at the Music Hall, hosted by Lena Spencer, owner of the famed Caffé Lena coffeehouse in Saratoga Springs, where Lavin was waitressing.

It was Klein who advised Lavin never to use bad language onstage (it cuts your potential audience by half, he said), and that advice would soon come in handy. Dave Van Ronk, the legendary “Mayor of MacDougal Street” who had mentored Bob Dylan among others, was another Caffé Lena favorite, and after meeting Lavin there he encouraged her to move to New York City. She did so in March 1976, with \$200 in savings, and soon found work singing at tables in an Upper West Side Mexican restaurant. In

due time she'd be opening for the likes of Van Ronk, Kenny Rankin, Tim Hardin, Arlo Guthrie, Livingston Taylor, and even Henny Youngman.

She still had to supplement her income, of course, with temp jobs like stenographer, statistical typist, and video-game demonstrator—even though she had no idea how to do any of them. In fact, she could easily have named her book “What Was I Thinking?” (like “Cold Pizza for Breakfast,” it's the title of one of her classic songs), since she says that phrase so often. But she worked diligently on her music, eventually recording 20 solo albums (Good Thing He Can't Read My Mind won her the New York Music Award in 1991 for Best Folk Album, though she details how she was essentially chased off the awards stage by rabid White Lion metal fans).

Lavin also produced nine compilation albums showcasing the work of other songwriters. Indeed, she has always been a tireless supporter of others, directing readers in Cold Pizza's preface to turn to the index and Google every single name listed. “You might make some life-changing musical discoveries,” she explains.

As for her own songs, they're best described as life-affirming—in more ways than one. “Amoeba Hop,” dating from her first album, puts to music the adventures of one-celled creatures in a puddle of water; it was inspired by her ninth grade biology class. In 2003 it was made into a children's book, leading to her performance at the annual international convention of the Society of Protozoologists.

Likewise, the lyrics of Lavin's song “Planet X,” about the trials and tribulations of Pluto's planetary status, were included in Hayden Planetarium director Neil deGrasse Tyson's 2009 book *The Pluto Files*. Her song “If We Had No Moon” has been included in *To Touch the Stars: A Musical Celebration of Space Exploration*, issued by the Mars Society in conjunction with the National Space Society.

As for her memoir's title-derived song “Cold Pizza for Breakfast,” it also inspired the ESPN show *Cold Pizza*—though because of a dispute with her music publishing company, the sports network never used, nor paid for, the song. Or the title.

Cold Pizza for Breakfast: A Mem-wha?? also touches on dealings and misdealings with record companies, music publishers, concert promoters, and club owners. But through it all is Lavin's eternally cheerful and optimistic outlook as she becomes the virtual heart and soul of folk music in New York from the mid-1980s to the present.

“Christine Lavin writes about things we didn't know we knew, makes us feel what we didn't know we felt, and, in the end, helps us understand life in a way we never thought we would,” writes Daniels. “That's what a true artist does.”

And as he so rightly concludes, “we're the better for it.”

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by Christine Lavin

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